

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 064 282

TE 002 963

AUTHOR Donelson, Kenneth L.  
TITLE What's an English Teacher to Do about Boredom on Monday Morning or Monday Afternoon or Tuesday or. . .?  
PUB DATE Apr 72  
NOTE 13p.  
JOURNAL CIT California English Journal; v8 n2 p38-50 April 1972  
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29  
DESCRIPTORS Changing Attitudes; \*Effective Teaching; \*English Instruction; Films; Literature; Problem Solving; \*Student Motivation; Teacher Qualifications; \*Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

A discussion of ways to motivate English students is presented. Five questions are presented and answers given. The questions are: "Do kids really want to be bored?" Why is their background so limited?" "How do we motivate students without being hams?" "Why do kids have to be entertained in every class?" and "Should we drop all boring English classes?" The following points are part of the responses made to these questions. Students are often bored by a dull teacher. Most students have limited background only in the sense that they don't know everything teachers would like them to know before they appear in their classes. Being a ham is a fine idea if it helps the student to acquire a sense of the excitement involved in literature. Good education is entertaining in one sense or another most of the time. This discussion includes literature films, and the media in general. (CK)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE  
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE  
PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS  
STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION  
POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS  
COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED  
BY KENNETH L. DONELSON  
AND "CALIF. ENGLISH J."  
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING  
UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF  
EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE  
THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF  
THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

## What's an English Teacher to Do about Boredom on Monday Morning or Monday Afternoon or Tuesday or ... ?

KENNETH L. DONELSON  
*Arizona State University, Tempe*

When I was invited to speak at the 1971 CATE meeting, my topic was originally listed as "What Do I Do on Monday?—The English Teacher Faces the Now World of Students." Though impressed by the incredible immediacy and remarkable relevance of that phrase, the "Now World," I was puzzled by what I or any English teacher could say about this topic, and I wrote a friend asking for help. Instead of giving help, he answered with a series of questions, all based on the assumption that many English teachers make today, that students in English classes are more likely to be innately and initially bored than students were in 1941 or 1951 or 1961 or even 1968. Here are his first five questions with my brief responses.

1. "Do kids really want to be bored?" Not particularly, but it hardly comes as a surprise that English teachers who bore

Kenneth L. Donelson

the hell out of their students rarely teach anything to anybody, no matter how often they take refuge in that surest of all signs of a bad and dull teacher, "Students just don't seem to appreciate all I'm trying to do for them, but *someday* they'll certainly be thankful they had my class."

2. "Why is their background so limited?" I don't think their background is limited. Most students have limited background only in the sense that they don't know everything we'd like them to know before they appear in our classes. "Enriched" may not be the word we would ordinarily use to describe our students' background, but often it is richer than the English teacher's at the front of the room.

3. "How do we motivate students without being hams?" What's wrong with being a ham? What's wrong with doing anything, no matter how hammy or sneaky, that will give our students some idea of what education is all about and some sense of the excitement involved in literature and literacy and writing and language and film. The question is not whether an English teacher should be a ham but whether the content of English is not important enough to do anything to keep the interest of students. Without students, English teachers have nothing but bare rooms.

4. "Why do kids have to be entertained in every class?" Why not entertain them? Isn't that the way most of us learned most things, because we were curious or amused or someone aroused or titillated us? Perhaps not everything educational is inherently exciting, but I'll bet few English teachers ever entered the field because literature or language or writing were dull. Maybe we shouldn't entertain students all the time, and I doubt that students expect us to be witty and scintillating every minute of every hour of every day. Nobody can be on stage all the time, but good education is entertaining in one sense or another most of the time. Some teachers may insist that entertaining students is pandering to their whims and favors, but education is a process of finding where kids are, finding some way of moving them, and then taking them further than the kids are aware they can go. Of course, education is hard work, but most educated people got that way because education was fascinating hard work. Real education is tiring, not tiresome.

5. "Should we drop all boring English classes?" Why not, and for that matter, why not devise some clever scheme (my typewriter slipped there, and typed "cleaver" and maybe that is a better word) to get rid of all boring English teachers in the process? Those ubiquitous elective programs that are currently the rage may ultimately serve as one way of weeding our pedagogical garden. Students are rapidly learning that good teachers make almost anything interesting and that bad and dull teachers make even science-fiction or films dull. Pauline Kael's remark, "If you think movies can't be killed, you underestimate the power of education," may prove to be less cynical than a realistic estimate of the awesome power of some English teachers to bore.<sup>1</sup>

His last question, "Can English teachers come up with any answers to the boredom of students?" deserves a detailed answer, and the rest of this article will give some possible answers that friends and students and I have found, not universals or cure-alls, but some things that have worked for some students and some teachers sometimes. The items listed below make no pretense of being sequential or cumulative or spiral, and they may not work with a particular class. Some items may not appear to fit the existing English curriculum in one school or another. If so, then the items may not be at fault; the fault may lie with the existing English curriculum. New ideas and materials and books and topics rarely do fit the existing English curriculum, but they just might possibly fit the existing students' needs and interests, and that is a higher priority.

#### CHALLENGING BOREDOM WITH STUDENT INTERESTS

First, why not try some ideas and topics directly and obviously related to the students' lives, things they read avidly and *feel* they already know about.

(1) *Anti-war literature and films.* Perhaps not every student will be turned on by Nat Hentoff's *I'm Really Dragged But Nothing Gets Me Down* or Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Neville Shute's *On the Beach* or Pat Frank's *Alas Babylon* or William March's *Company K* or William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, but many will be. And surely the really excellent war or anti-war literature takes up a problem that hits every young person today, that of the battle between the private conscience and the

1. Pauline Kael, "It's Only a Movie," in David Stewart, ed., *Film Study in Higher Education*, Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1966, p. 137.

Kenneth L. Donelson

public conscience, between what a man deeply believes right and good and what society believes right and good. The books cited above do that, but so do such modern non-war plays as Friedrich Duerrenmatt's *The Visit* or Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana* or Arthur Miller's *The Price* or *All My Sons* or Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* or George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* or such classic plays as Sophocles' *Antigone* or Henrik Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. That these works are relevant to today's students is obvious; that they can be made dull and unpalatable by unimaginative English teachers goes without saying. Feature-length films like *From Here to Eternity* or *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Graduate* or *The Ox-Bow Incident* or *Billy Budd* illustrate this human dilemma, but perhaps shorter films like "Night and Fog" or "Toys" or "Wargames" or "Ares Contra Atlas" or "The Magician" or "The Hangman" illustrate the point fully as well and their brevity allows class time for discussion.

(2) *Films in and of themselves.* We sometimes may rush so madly to discover what films may fit this thematic unit or that elective or the study of this novel or that genre that we forget that film deserves attention in and of itself. Of course, we will always have English teachers who lament that students already go to too many movies, that it is not the purpose of education to spend time encouraging students to do what they already do. Oddly enough, I have never heard a teacher use that argument with students who already like to read or who already write rather well. Perhaps, teachers are most prone to use the argument in dealing with material they do not know well or are totally unprepared to teach. But why not learn some things along with the students? Anyway, there's a plethora of material on film readily available for any teacher who takes even the briefest of peeks—books like Arthur Knight's *The Liveliest Art* (a good history of movies), William Kuhns and Robert Stanley's *Exploring the Film* (the best book on teaching or discussing the film with high school kids), Sharon Feyen's *Screen Experience: An Approach to Film* (covering just about everything on film or film teaching), Pauline Kael's *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* or *I Lost It at the Movies* (brief film criticism), or Edward Pincus' *Guide to Filmmaking* (a sound guide which is in inexpensive paperback). And skipping the cost and time problems of feature-length films, there are many many short films deserving time and discussion in English class—films like the ubiquitous "Why Man Creates" and "Glass" and "The Hand" but also like the less well-known "Time Piece" or "The Sixties" or "Genesis" or "Nahanni" or "The Big Shave" or "Help! My Snowman's Burning Down" or "Catch the Joy" or "The Stringbean." Scripts of several highly popular feature-length films are now available

#### What's an English Teacher to Do about Boredom

and these have interested some otherwise bored students, scripts like *Easy Rider* and *Joe and Salesman*. Someone somewhere ought to use the *Maysles Brothers'* film of *Salesman* and the published script in connection with Miller's *Death of a Salesman* or O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* or Lewis' *Babbitt*.

(3) *Media generally, with or/without film.* Anyone who has read McLuhan's *Understanding Media* or *The Medium Is the Message* or *War and Peace in the Global Village* or Edmund Farrell's *English, Education, and the Electronics Revolution* or virtually any issue of *Media and Methods* is aware of the tremendous impact and influence of all kinds of media on our lives today. Students are barraged with it and by it, yet they sometimes seem incredibly naive about what media does to the human race or how it does it. A number of books have described the pervasive influence of television, but none seem to me so perceptive and witty and stimulating as Charles Sopkin's *Seven Glorious Days, Seven Fun-Filled Nights*, an account of Sopkin's attempt (not always successful) to watch every TV channel in New York City for seven days, an idea he picked up from Fred Friendly's book *Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control*. Sopkin is opinionated and frequently cynical, but he is almost never dull, and virtually every page has ideas or comments students would react to. Students, and far too many adults, seem to have sublime faith that if they saw "it" on television, it must be true, and that attitude is so dangerous that it deserves the English teachers' attention. Perhaps few of our students will read much after they leave high school, but they will watch television more and more as they get older and they will go to the movies, and both television productions and movies are so much the result of editing that we really must make clear to at least a few students that what they see on a home or downtown screen is there because someone somewhere wanted viewers to see it, not because it tells the complete truth or even a small part of truth. Even when viewers watch a live telecast of a football game, they are being carefully manipulated—the director forces viewers to look at precisely what the director wants them to see. TV viewers cannot look at what they might choose to see at the actual game, watch the quarterback or the split end or the cheerleaders or that busty redhead three rows down or the clouds or the nearby mountains or what have you. So the football game is a trivial example? But it does reveal the power of the director and producer, and the implications of their power and the writer's power and the editor's power on more significant television programs, just as a political rally or a presidential speech or a riot suggests that English teachers had better become aware that many students and adults are being manipulated without their being aware of it. All languages are manipulatory, but peo-

Kenneth L. Donelson

ple using or "reading" these languages (film, print, television) need to know that and to take that into account. Two recent paperbacks would make a helpful start in that direction, Buckminster Fuller's *I Seem to Be a Verb* and Arthur Daigon and Ronald LaConte's *Dig/U.S.A.*

(4) *Minority literature.* In the last few years, English teachers have grown increasingly aware of minorities in the classroom and the minority literature which might be of interest to them. If black students and black literature have benefitted from this belated moral and literary awakening, other minority groups have been nearly ignored, and far too many students today are ignorant of the Indian literature they might enjoy. I think especially of two books, now available in paperback, which have worked with bored students, N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. Momaday's book is a collection of legends and myths and history about the sacred area of the Kiowa Indians in Oklahoma, while Deloria's book is a bitingly witty examination of the treatment accorded Indians over the course of the last 200 years. Just a few lines from Deloria's underused book will give some of its flavor and tang.

After Lyndon B. Johnson had been elected he came before the American people with his message on Vietnam. The import of the message was that America had to keep her commitments in Southeast Asia or the world would lose faith in the promises of our country.

Some years later Richard Nixon warned the American people that Russia was bad because she had not kept any treaty or agreement signed with her. You can trust the Communists, the saying went, to be Communists.

Indian people laugh themselves sick when they hear these statements. America has yet to keep an Indian treaty or agreement despite the fact the United States Government signed over four hundred such treaties and agreements with Indian tribes. It would take Russia another century to make and break as many treaties as the United States has already violated. (p. 28)

One of the major problems of the Indian people is the missionary. It has been said of missionaries that when they arrived they had only the Book and we had the land; now we have the Book and they have the land. An old Indian once told me that when the missionaries arrived they fell on their knees and prayed. Then they got up, fell on the Indians, and preyed. (p. 101)

A few other books which will alert students to the different ways of Indians are Margot Astrov's *American Indian Prose and Poetry* (published in hardback as *The Winged Serpent*), A. Grove Day's *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indian*, and the contemporary collection by Gerald Haslam, *Forgotten Pages of American Literature*, with a section devoted to American Indian literature and another section on Latino-American

#### What's an English Teacher to Do about Boredom

literature. Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* has recently been a most surprising best-seller, and students would like it very much, both for its history and its sense of compassion. John G. Neihardt's appearance on the Dick Cavett talkshow and his discussion of the background of his great mythic book, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, should create a wider audience for this too-little read book.

(5) *Ecological literature*. The world is so much with adults late and soon that we sometimes forget the world is also very much with the young. We talk of handing the torch on to young people and blithely forget that the torch has singed or scorched much of the earth. Students do not and cannot forget, for what we have given them is their world; it may not be a world they have made or even want, but it is a world they must learn to inhabit. One very new and promising little anthology of ecological literature is *The Arthur Godfrey Environmental Reader* with selections from books like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Robert and Leona Rienow's *Moment in the Sun* and Wesley Marx's *The Frail Ocean* and William Wise's *Killer Smog* and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. If this book does not receive the attention and use it deserves in the English class (either as good literature or effective rhetoric), then I fear that English teachers who complain of the boredom of the young have no understanding of the very real fear of the future of those same young people. Another book deserving consideration is William Schwartz's *Voices for the Wilderness*, papers from Sierra Club Wilderness Conferences. Two books an English teacher considering either book above (or any other ecological literature) should look at are Harold Helfrich's *The Environmental Crisis: Man's Struggle to Live with Himself* (a series of lectures given at Yale) and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, a brilliant and wonderfully well written book about America's changing attitude toward the idea of wilderness from Thoreau to John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Books on the future and the problems our students will face then are provocative for many students, and Buckminster Fuller's *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity* and *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* or Donald Michael's *The Unprepared Society: Planning for a Precarious Future* or John McHale's *The Future of the Future* could arouse controversy within a class.

#### USING THE UNFAMILIAR AGAINST BOREDOM

Second, why not try some things that are apparently not directly related to students' lives, things they might seem uninterested in or indifferent to.

Kenneth L. Donelson

(1) *The concept and nature of education.* Many of us are so certain that students are at best indifferent to education, at worst antagonistic, and we too seldom examine what we mean by that term, *education*. Should education be a defense of the status quo? Should it be a worshipping of the glories of yesteryear? Should it be a regurgitation of what *everyone* has always *assumed* to be the truth? Should it be a trip back to the halcyon days of yore to compare the drabness of our 1971 lives with the wonderful past? Should it be a chance for students to see what has been, what is, and what may be? Should it be an opportunity to begin to look for answers to questions that students formulate? Should it be the opportunity to begin to look for questions about questions? Herbert Kohl's *The Open Classroom* and Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* are rooted in today and tomorrow. Practically, I suppose it makes little difference to students whether teachers are rooted in yesterday, today, or tomorrow, but it should make a difference to the teacher since students are clearly rooted in their today and their tomorrows. English teachers do, after all, have a choice—either to stay where they are or to come into the world of their students. Students may not really give a damn which way English teachers go, but English teachers had better give a damn or their literature and language and rhetoric are lost for all the good they will do most students. Several recent paperbacks have pointed this out, and each is worth reading by English teachers and likely to be valuable in the classroom. Jerry Farber's *The Student as Nigger* and Robert Gold's *The Rebel Culture* have sold well, but probably of more interest are John Birmingham's *Our Time Is Now* and Diane Divoky's *How Old Will You Be in 1984?* both collections of writing from underground high school newspapers. I know of few schools that have used these latter two books in English classes, but I do know that the books are not simply bitch sessions about education. True there are plenty of gripes, some obvious, some surprising, but along with Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's *The Soft Revolution*, these books will open the eyes of English teachers and some students and there are specific and potentially exciting and worthwhile suggestions for new directions students would like education to take. That the student writers in Birmingham and Divoky do something besides complain is proof that some students are interested in the unrealized possibilities of education. Perhaps more students would be inclined to discuss education (not merely gripe about it) if they felt that education was not in the teachers' eyes a closed subject.

(2) *Western literature.* While our students live in the West, we infrequently consider the remote possibility that our western heritage and western literature and western art or western music might appeal to young

#### What's an English Teacher to Do about Boredom

people, as a break in the routine if nothing more. Perhaps like film, western material is little taught or used in English class because it is academically disreputable, perhaps because too few English teachers have formal class training in this material. The west may not have yet produced a Hawthorne or a James or a Melville or a Faulkner, and maybe the west never will, but it has produced a Walter Van Tilburg Clark and an A. B. Guthrie and a Wallace Stegner and a William Eastlake and a Scott Momaday and that's not a bad start. In beginning his preface to the recent anthology *The Literature of the American West*, J. Golden Taylor wrote,

The diversity, richness, and challenge of life in the American West during the past century and a half, and the excellence and variety of the portrayal of that life in literature are very little known in these United States—even in the West itself.

Recently as editor of the *Arizona English Bulletin*, I surveyed nearly 100 members of the Western Literature Association and the Western Writers of America to determine what novels those teachers and writers would suggest for young people. Listing just a few of the many titles enthusiastically recommended might give English teachers some awareness of the riches available, and students are often intrigued by a kind of literature they know next to nothing about. Oliver LaFarge's *Laughing Boy* and *The Enemy Gods*, Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*, Frank Waters' *The Man Who Killed the Deer* and *People of the Valley*, Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* and *The Track of the Cat*, Benjamin Capps' *A Woman of the People* and *Sam Chance* and *The White Man's Road*, Edwin Corle's *Fig Tree John* and *People on the Earth*, William Decker's *To Be a Man*, William Eastlake's *The Bronc People* and *Portrait of an Artist with Twenty-Six Horses*, Harvey Fergusson's *Grant of the Kingdom* and *Blood of the Conquerors*, Vardis Fisher's *Children of God* and *Mountain Man*, Robert Flynn's *North to Yesterday*, Bill Gulick's *Liveliest Town in the West*, Will Henry's *One More River to Cross* and *From Where the Sun Now Stands*, and on and on and on. Much of this literature reads well by any but the most exacting literary standards. I would defy anyone to read Benjamin Capps' *The White Man's Road* without getting a better understanding of the cultural gap between white men and Indians, to read William Decker's *To Be a Man* without getting a greater awareness of what being a cowboy and an independent spirit could be like, to read Robert Flynn's *North to Yesterday* without getting a finer understanding of what the west meant to men who were alive only as the old west declined.

(3) *Asian literature, especially religious literature.* As students march into an increasingly uncertain and even dismal future, they look two ways

Kenneth L. Donelson

at once. They look to the present to find answers to the future or to find questions worthy of answering in the future, but paradoxically they also look toward the past, especially in matters of religion toward Asia. I have no interest in encouraging a kind of "cultism" in English classes, but the interest young people have shown in Zen Buddhism and Yoga and meditation are not simply poses but a reflection of a real need. Many schools have developed electives around "The Bible as Literature" or "World Religions," but English classes at large could take at least a cursory glance at the various religious texts of the Orient. At least two paperbacks should be in every English teacher's library, if for no greater reason than that they have affected a considerable number of western writers—*The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita* and *The Upanishads* (I question whether Emerson can truly be comprehended if the reader does not know the *Katha Upanishad*). Let me quote just a little of one *Upanishad* which I believe is directly related to the interests of young people today, one I and several of my friends have used.

Gods, men, and asuras (lower beings)—all three descendants of Prajapati—lived with him for a time as students

Then the gods said: "Teach us, sir!" In reply Prajapati uttered one syllable: 'Da.' Then he said: 'Have you understood?' They answered, 'Yes, we have understood. You said to us, 'Damayata—Be self-controlled.' 'Yes,' agreed Prajapati, 'you have understood.'

Then the men said: "Teach us, sir." Prajapati uttered the same syllable: 'Da.' Then he said: 'Have you understood?' They answered, 'Yes, we have understood. You said to us, 'Datta—Be charitable.' 'Yes,' agreed Prajapati, 'you have understood.'

Then the asuras said: "Teach us, sir." Prajapati uttered the same syllable: 'Da.' Then he said: 'Have you understood?' They said, 'Yes, we have understood. You told us Dayadhwam—Be compassionate.' 'Yes,' agreed Prajapati, 'you have understood.'

The storm cloud thunders: 'Da! Da! Da!'—"Be self-controlled! Be charitable! Be compassionate!"<sup>2</sup>

(4) *Nostalgia revisited.* Not only do students look back to the calm and meditative life of Asian religion, they also look back to a more recent time, the 1930's and 1940's. A friend of mine at Saguaro High School in Scottsdale, Mrs. Rose Nack, developed a thematic unit last year built on the assumption that students might just possibly be curious about the youthful world of their fathers and mothers during the thankless '30's and the fickle '40's. Although it may have begun as a hunch, its success in her

2. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, New York: New American Library, 1957, p. 112.

#### What's an English Teacher to Do about Boredom

school is almost without parallel. Not only are her students excited about what they are doing but students from other classes drop by frequently to see what's going on and other English teachers are honestly curious about what Mrs. Nack is going to do next in her unit. Of course, some of the student interest may initially have been a compound of morbid curiosity about the world of their parents' youth and disbelief that anything so remote could have any value to them. But the students' delight in reading Jim Harmon's *The Great Radio Heroes*, in listening to old records of the *Lone Ranger* and *Jack Armstrong* and in listening to old songs like "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" or "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree with Anyone Else but Me" and in making posters of cars and movie stars and ration stamps and ads and old high school newspapers of the 1930's and 1940's is obvious to any viewer. Perhaps the most exciting and profitable aspect of the unit is that the source material is in the students' homes and the only really good sources of information are the students' parents and grandparents. It would be a gross overstatement to suggest that Mrs. Nack's unit has closed the generation gap for students and parents, but some kids have *talked* to their parents for the first time in several years, and some students have at least learned that their parents might have something to say that the kids might care about. The academic and psychological respectability of Mrs. Nack's unit was established by the lead article in the December 28, 1970, *Newsweek*. In writing of "Nostalgia," the *Newsweek* writer said,

Nostalgia for the American dreamland is sweeping the country like a Kansas twister, tossing up people and things we haven't seen or heard from or even thought about since Little Orphan Annie's Sandy first said, 'Arf.' . . . One answer (for the wave of nostalgia) comes from Alvin Toffler, author of the best-selling *Future Shock*, who believes that 'the tremendous wave of nostalgia mirrors a psychological lust for a simpler, less turbulent past.' . . . 'Nostalgia is a bridge over the generation gap,' says *Nanette* producer Harry Rigby. 'Kids have finally found something they can like about their parents.' And just as sociologists who analyzed the Kent State killings warned that the society that hates its young has no future, many social scientists feel that it is almost impossible for the younger generation to completely alienate itself from its elders and the stream of history. A complete denial of one's forbear is just too close to self-hate.

(5) *Modern poetry*. We sometimes lament that this is not a poetic age and then determine to ignore poetry or to treat it perfunctorily since we *know* students will not like it anyway. Then, noting the lyrics of many pop or rock songs, we decide we were probably wrong, and we rip the lyrics from the music and present them as modern poems. But both our assumptions are questionable. Students write considerable amounts of

Kenneth L. Donelson

poetry, much poetry today is potentially popular with young people, and rock songs are an amalgam of words and music (and sometimes dancing and light shows) and with rare exceptions like "Eleanor Rigby" do not work well ripped off the printed music. What modern poets or poems might appeal to young people? Richard Brautigan is certainly popular with many kids for his book, *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*, but his popularity comes as no surprise to many English teachers who have intrigued students with the poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko and J. D. Reed and Jim Harrison and Kenneth Patchen and Leonard Cohen and Denise Levertov and Diane Wakoski. Student interest in poetry or student willingness to give poetry a fair try is to some degree dependent upon the choice of poet and poem; however, to a greater degree, it is dependent upon the teacher's attitude toward poetry. An English teacher who likes poetry, who reads poetry for enjoyment, who knows many kinds of poetry for many kinds of students, who is honestly enthusiastic about poetry, who avoids romantic excesses of gushiness but who reads intelligently and interestingly and frequently, he stands some chance of convincing students that poetry has something to offer. One new and exciting and mammoth paperback collection is Hayden Carruth's *The Voice That Is Great Within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, representing work from Robert Frost to Joel Sloman with usable and fine poetry by such writers as Diane Wakoski, Jim Harrison, Leroi Jones, David Ray, George Starbuck, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Adrienne Rich, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Robert Greeley, and Robert Bly. Two collections of student poetry often used are Stephen Joseph's *The Me Nobody Knows* and Stephen Dunning's *Mad, Sad, and Glad*. Surely, the two basic collections for many teachers will be Dunning's *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle* and *Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needle*, both full of modern, brief, excellent poetry of considerable appeal to young people with a wide array of poets represented—e. e. cummings, Theodore Roethke, John Ciardi, Hilaire Belloc, Ezra Pound, Walker Gibson, Donald Justice, Karl Shapiro, Langston Hughes, Yvor Winters, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Francis, Edward Lueders, W. H. Auden, William Stafford, Donald Hall, Reuel Denney, Howard Nemerov, John Updike, and W. D. Snodgrass. Two recent textbook series have impressive books on poetry—the Addison-Wesley Series, *Voices of Man*, and McDougal, Littell series, *Man in the Poetic Mode*. And English teachers should not forget or discount older books of poetry, Gibran's *The Prophet* and Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, which still appeal to many young people. The electricity of discovering a poet new to you and then sharing him with your class, all the time aware that the class can be pleasantly

What's an English Teacher to Do about Boredom

shocked or you unhappily jolted by the reaction, makes teaching poetry potentially frustrating or thrilling, but rarely dull. Unhappily, the conclusion drawn by some English teachers about student dislike of poetry is too often based on class reaction to poetry from a class anthology taught by an English teacher who demonstrates no personal interest in the literature. Poetry has to have contact with students, and that is the teacher's job.

What do we do on Monday morning or Monday afternoon or Tuesday morning? We exhaust ourselves and our resources to discover materials that just might possibly stand some chance of turning some kid on. We look in the library and the bookstore, we watch television, we view films, we read newspapers and magazines, and we keep doing all this time after time, knowing full well we will never find a panacea or any permanent answer, just temporary alleviations. Why do we keep on with this frustrating and impossible job? Simple answer—because we're English teachers and that's what our racket consists of and we care. There can't be any other answer.